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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between vocational education rehabilitation agency placement policy and field office productivity. A total of 112 counselors and 25 supervisors from twenty-two Division of Vocational Rehabilitation field offices from seven states were given questionnaires covering different facets of placement policy including staff perceptions, reactions, and behaviors. Field office reports and records were also examined. Analyses revealed seven general relationships between policy issues and office productivity. These include the following: (1) having experienced supervisors was associated with high office productivity: (2) productive offices were more likely to have goals for large case loads and large numbers of rehabilitations rather than for referrals or writing plans: (3) emphasis on serving disabled clients was associated with lower productivity: (4) such placement-related resources as job skill classes, service funding, and outside placement facilities were linked with office performance: (5) management practices which foster a participative style of office administration, clear and consistent policy communication, stability of staffing, standards for devoting time to placement, and goal-directed performance evaluations were characteristic of high-producing offices: and (6) staff abilities and attitudes were associated with office productivity in predictable ways. (MN)

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VR PLACEMENT POLICY AND FIELD OFFICE PRODUCTION

Rehabilitation agencies express their view of placement through the formulation and articulation of placement policies. While they usually assume (or fervently hope) that policies translate readily into performance, in practice this does not always happen. One complicating factor is that policies may be distorted as they filter down through different levels of the agency. For example, if a policy if formulated by agency administration and transmitted through district and field office supervisors, it may be subtly altered by the time it reaches counselors. Moreover, even if communication is accurate in an objective sense, staff perceptions or interpretations of the policy may still differ, depending on personal bias, intra-agency politics, local conditions, and other factors. For a variety of reasons, placement policies may fail to influence performance or may influence it in a manner different from what was intended.

Research evidence on the relationship between policy and performance is scarce. Several studies have demonstrated that policies which encourage large case loads are associated with high numbers of rehabilitations (Eber, 1966; Mueller and Atlas, 1969; Zadny and James, 1977a). Zadny and James (1977b) found that policies which established high status 26 production goals, required the use of separate placement plans, and allocated time for counselors to spend outside the office were associated with high numbers of rehabilitations and low numbers of status 28 closures. These findings are consistent in linking placement policies with counselor placement performance.

The present study examined relationships between retrospective perceptions and interpretations of policy and field office production of Status 26 and Status 28 closures. Included in this examination were reports of policy pronouncements as well as resource allocations and management practices related to policy. Unlike previous research, the study was based on the reports and records of entire field offices rather than individual staff in order to detect relationships which reflects shared beliefs or perceptions. It was designed to optimize the detection of relationships by focusing exclusively on offices with an unusually high or low record of Status 26 closures. Also, both counselors and supervisors were included in order to account for different levels of office organizations.

METHOD

The sample consisted of 22 Division of Vocational Rehabilitation field offices from seven states. Each state was first asked to identify those field offices which produced unusually high or low numbers of Status 26 closures during the preceding fiscal year. In three states, the highest and lowest producing offices were then selected for participation in the study, while in four other states, the two highest and two lowest producing offices were selected. Offices which served a specialized case load were excluded from consideration.

Data were obtained from each office through questionnaires which were administered to counselors and supervisors and through interviews which were conducted with supervisors. The counselor questionnaires contained 106 items covering different facets of placement policy including staff

perceptions, reactions, and behaviors. The supervisor questionnaires contained 72 items covering content similar to the counselor questionnaire as well as special supervisory issues. The supervisor interview covered additional supervisory issues and provided an opportunity to obtain information in a less structured manner. Of the 117 counselors who were asked to participate, 112 complied, resulting in a response rate of 96 percent. Of the 25 supervisors who were asked to participate, all complied.

Each state agency was asked to provide FY 1978 data on each participating office's rate of Status 26, 28, and 30 closures. A percentage measure of Status 28 production was then formed by taking the ratio of each office's Status 28 closures to the sum of its Status 26, 28, and 30 closures. This was done in order to control for volume of closures.

After all data had been collected, the questionnaire responses of counslors were collapsed by office to yield an average counselor score of each item for each of the 22 offices. In those offices which had more than one supervisor, a similar procedure was followed so that an average supervisor score on each item and interview response was obtained for each office. The average scores were then correlated with the dichotomous variable of high/low Status 26 production and the percentage of Status 28 closures. All analyses were based on simple Pearson correlation coefficients.

RESULTS

The analyses revealed a number of significant relationships between various policy issues and office productivity. These relationships appeared to follow seven general patterns or trends:

1. Having experienced supervisors was strongly associated with high office productivity. The longer supervisors had worked for an agency, the more likely they were to be associated with a high producing office ($r=.70$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the longer they had occupied their position as supervisor and the longer they had been working in the field of vocational rehabilitation, the more likely they were to be associated with a high producing office ($r=.70$ and .61 respectively, $p < .01$). To some extent, these findings may reflect a selection factor whereby nonproductive supervisors are gradually lost to attrition or termination. Thus only productive supervisors remain to accrue experience. Alternatively, these findings may be taken to show the value of having supervisors with substantial VR experience. Such supervisors may be skilled in the pragmatics of placement so that they favorably influence the productivity of their offices.

Experience was clearly not the same as education; in fact, education was found to be negatively related to office placement performance. Low producing offices were more likely to have supervisors with master's degrees while high producing offices were more likely to have supervisors with baccalaureates ($r=-.46$, $p < .05$). Also, offices which obtained relatively high percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have supervisors with master's degrees while offices which obtained relatively low percentages

of Status 28 closures were more likely to have supervisors with bachelor's degrees ($r=.47$, $p < .05$). The possibility that these findings were due to a selection factor whereby bachelor's level supervisors remain in their positions only if they are productive was contraindicated by the lack of significant correlations between education and experience. Thus it is unlikely that the negative relationship found between supervisor education and office performance was due to the natural attrition of non-productive supervisors with bachelor's degrees. Rather, the findings may reflect a tendency for bachelor-level supervisors to be less concerned with abstract theoretical issues and more concerned with pragmatic issues related to finding clients jobs. This fundamental orientation may serve to influence counselors to direct more efforts toward placement thereby increasing Status 26 closures while decreasing Status 28 closures. At any rate, the present findings raise some important questions about professional education, particularly in view of a recent survey (English, Oberle, and Byrne, 1979) which reported that over 70 percent of all first-line supervisors had master's degrees.

2. Productive field offices were more likely to have goals for large case loads and large numbers of rehabilitations, while nonproductive offices were more likely to have goals for referrals and writing plans.

In the first instance, offices in which counselors were expected to carry a large number of cases tended to obtain high numbers of Status 26 closures ($r=.46$, $p < .05$) and low percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=-.52$, $p < .05$). Also, offices in which counselors set relatively high goals for Status 26 closures tended to obtain high numbers of such closures ($r=.42$, $p < .05$),

and offices in which supervisors reported setting Status 26 production goals for all or most counselors tended to have low percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=.44$, $p < .05$). There was also a tendency for offices which obtained high numbers of Status 26 closures to have a high average number of open cases per counselor; however, this correlation failed to attain significance. Taken together, these findings suggest that high volume is related to high productivity, and in this respect, are similar to findings reported in previous studies (Eber, 1966; Mueller and Atlas, 1969; Zadny and James, 1978).

High volume does not appear to entail a sacrifice in quality of services, at least from the perspective of supervisors. Offices which produced a high number of Status 26 closures and a low percentage of Status 28 closures tended to have supervisors who indicated that their agency emphasized providing quality services over serving as many clients as possible (both $r=.52$, $p < .05$). Moreover, high producing offices were more likely than low producing offices to have supervisors who indicated that their agency maximized the quality of jobs obtained for clients at whatever cost ($r=.49$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that high case loads and production goals are compatible with high quality of both services and placements.

Goals pertaining to referrals and plans were negatively associated with productivity. Offices in which counselors reported that they were assigned a high goal for referrals and a goal for number of new plans written tended to have high percentages of Status 28 closures (both $r=.43$, $p < .05$). Also offices in which counselors reported that their agency placed a high priority on writing new plans tended to have high percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=.67$, $p < .01$).

Supervisors' responses were consistent with those of counselors. When supervisors reported that their agency assigned a high priority to writing new plans and that the administration set goals for the number of new plans written, their offices tended to have a high percentage of Status 28 closures ($r=.53$, $p < .01$ and $r=.47$, $p < .05$, respectively). Also, the average percentage of Status 28 closures obtained by an office tended to be higher to the extent that the supervisor reported spending more time in reviewing plans and approving closures ($r=.43$, $p < .05$).

These findings suggest that emphasizing referrals and plans either leads to poor productivity or may be itself an outgrowth of poor productivity. In the first case counselors may spend so much time on referrals and plans that they lose touch with the placement needs of their case load and thereby close more cases as not rehabilitated. Alternatively, counselors may be directed to process more referrals and plans as a result of, rather than a cause of, poor productivity. Such a strategy may bring in clients who are more difficult to place in suitable employment and consequently continue the trend.

3. An emphasis on serving severely disabled clients was associated with lower office productivity. Offices which obtained a high percentage of Status 28 closures tended to have counselors who reported that their agency assigned a high priority to serving the severely disabled ($r=.48$, $p < .05$). Also, offices which obtained low numbers of Status 26 closures tended to have counselors who said they were assigned a goal for number or percent of accepted cases which were to be severely disabled ($r=.47$, $p < .05$).

The responses of supervisors were consistent with those of counselors. Offices with low numbers of Status 26 closures tended to have supervisors

who indicated that they set goals for their counselors regarding percent of case loads to be severely disabled ($r=-.55$, $p < .01$). Moreover, such offices were likely to have supervisors who reported that the administration expected rehabilitations to decrease as greater numbers of severely disabled persons were served ($r=-.45$, $p < .05$).

These findings attest to the difficulties of serving severely disabled clients. They also imply that offices will have lower production to the extent that emphasis is placed on serving such clients, unless or until improved rehabilitation procedures are developed for working with them.

4. Certain placement-related resources, specifically, job-seeking skills classes, work adjustment training, case service funding, and outside placement facilities were favorably associated with office performance. Another resource, counselor training, was negatively associated with the number of successful closures.

Job-seeking Skills Class and Work Adjustment Training. Offices tended to have low percentages of Status 28 closures to the extent that job-seeking skills classes and work adjustment training were reported by counselors to be available to their clients. Moreover, offices tended to have high numbers of Status 26 closures to the extent that counselors considered the work adjustment training to be effective ($r=.44$, $p < .05$).

Funding. Offices in which counselors said their agencies had increased case service funds beyond the amount necessary to keep step with inflation tended to produce lower percentages of Status 28 closures than offices in which counselors said this was not the case ($r=-.44$, $p < .05$). Also offices in which counselors reported having inadequate funds to cover counselor's

business-related travel tended to produce higher numbers of Status 26 closures ($r=.47$, $p < .05$), than offices in which supervisors reported that travel funds were adequate. This latter finding is puzzling unless it suggests supervisors in high producing offices, by emphaizing field work, had exhausted travel monies, while supervisors in low producing offices, by not emphasizing field work, encountered no reason to exhaust travel monies.

Outside Placement Facilities. Offices which had high percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have counselors who described their working relations with the local employment office as poor than offices which had low percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=-.50$, $p < .05$). Also, high producing offices were more likely to have counselors who attributed placements to third parties outside the agency than low producing offices ($r=.69$, $p < .01$). Both of these findings can be viewed as support for the use of outside placement facilities, although the first finding may also reflect a desire on the part of counselors to share responsibility for placement failures with other parties.

Counselor Training. High producing offices were less likely to have counselors who viewed their job development training as useful in getting clients jobs than low producing offices ($r=-.48$, $p < .05$). Possibly counselors who were successful at placement felt that their own methods of job development were more effective than the methods espoused by the training. Also, offices which had high percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have counselors who reported spending more time on inservice training and workshops than offices which had low percentages of such closures ($r=.43$, $p < .05$).

This latter finding may reflect a tendency for agencies to provide such training to staff who are experiencing difficulties.

5. Management practices which foster a participative style of office administration, clear and consistent communication of policy, stability of staffing, standards for devoting time to placement, and goal directed performance evaluations were characteristic of high producing offices. Conversely, supervisor efforts to increase public relations were characteristic of low producing offices.

Administrative Style. Offices which obtained low percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have counselors who described the office's administration as participatory rather than autocratic ($r=-.52$, $p < .05$). A similar finding was reported by Vialle and Hill (1973) who found that staff in effective field offices were more likely to describe their agency administration as participative rather than authoritarian. Also, English et al. (1979) reported that a majority of rehabilitation professionals considered the most desirable management style to be one which was democratic. Thus the present finding corroborates those of other studies in supporting the use of participative management.

Policy Communication. Favorable placement performance was associated with clear and consistent communication of policy as seen by supervisors. Offices which obtain high numbers of Status 26 closures were more likely to have supervisors who described their agency's policy as clear than offices which obtained low numbers of Status 26 closures ($r=.46$, $p < .05$). Also, offices which obtained high percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have supervisors who described their agency's placement policy as in-

consistent with one another than offices which obtained low percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=-.63$, $p < .01$). To some extent, these findings may reflect a tendency for supervisors to blame their office's production problems on the agency's miscommunication of policy. However, they also imply that the clarity and consistency of policy may have a bearing on production.

Staffing Instability. Instability of staffing on both administrative and counselor levels was associated with poor placement performance. Offices were more likely to obtain high percentages of Status 28 closures to the extent that supervisors reported that there had been a significant change in the agency's administrative staffing which affected placement policy during the last fiscal year ($r=.60$, $p < .01$). Moreover, offices were more likely to have high percentages of Status 28 closures to the extent that supervisors reported that the changes which occurred were detrimental ($r=.57$, $p < .01$) and involved staff as well as agency reorganization ($r=.58$, $p < .01$). In a similar vein, offices tended to have high percentages of Status 28 closures to the extent that supervisors reported losing counselors to other jobs in the agency ($r=.45$, $p < .05$, and having part-time counselors ($r=.53$, $p < .01$) and non-case load carrying aides ($r=.45$, $p < .05$).

When counselors were asked about staffing issues, their responses also suggested that instability was counterproductive. Offices which obtained low numbers of Status 26 closures were more likely to have counselors who reported that they changed case load assignments during the previous year than offices which obtained high numbers of Status 26 closures ($r=-.50$, $p < .05$). Also, offices which obtained low percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have counselors who reported that seniority, an issue related to stability,

was an important factor in obtaining a promotion than offices which obtained high percentages of Status 28 closures ($r=.48$, $p < .05$). By the same token, there was a tendency, albeit a nonsignificant one, for high producing offices to have counselors who rated seniority as being important to promotion than low producing offices ($r=.39$, $p < .10$).

Standards for Time Spent on Placement. Offices which had standards for the amount of time counselors were to devote to job placement and job development were more likely to close a low percentage of cases Status 28 than offices which did not have such standards ($r=-.49$, $p < .05$). This finding was similar to those reported by Zadny and James (1977a) who found that increases in time spent on placement-related activities were associated with more rehabilitations and fewer cases closed non-rehabilitated.

Performance Evaluation. Fewer rehabilitation failures were experienced by offices where performance evaluations were closely tied to placement work. Offices in which counselors reported that placement work was an important aspect of their performance evaluation ($r=-.50$, $p < .05$) and that they could expect to be penalized for low productivity ($r=-.45$, $p < .05$) tended to have low percentages of Status 28 closures than offices in which counselors said this was not the case. These findings lend support to principles (Odiorne, 1965) which stress the importance of linking performance evaluation to clearly defined goals.

Public Relations Practices. Efforts on the part of the supervisor to establish public relations were associated with poor office performance. Offices which produced low numbers of Status 26 closures were more likely

to have supervisors who reported spending time in public relations than offices which produced high numbers of Status 26 closures ($r=-.46$, $p < .05$). Similarly, offices had higher percentages of Status 28 closures to the extent that supervisors reported making placement-related employer contacts ($r=.49$, $p < .05$). There was also a tendency for offices in which supervisors reported making a heavy investment in public relations to have low numbers of Status 26 closures; however, the correlation was not significant ($r=-.38$, $p < .10$).

6. Staff abilities and attitudes which centered around placement policy were associated with office productivity in predictable ways.

Offices in which counselors kept abreast of labor market information, saw themselves as good in placement, and did well in the past tended to be highly productive. Specifically, high producing offices were more likely to have counselors who rated themselves as being knowledgeable about the local labor market ($r=.47$, $p < .05$) and current job openings ($r=.43$, $p < .05$) than low producing offices. Moreover, high producing offices were more likely to have counselors who rated themselves as being proficient in job placement ($r=.52$, $p < .05$), who were more likely to endorse the idea that obtaining 40 rehabilitations per year is a reasonable goal ($r=-.49$, $p < .05$), and who were more likely to have obtained a high number of Status 26 closures during the preceding fiscal year ($r=.58$, $p < .01$) than low producing offices. In the same vein, offices which had low percentages of Status 28 closures were more likely to have counselors who agreed with the notion that job placement should be on a counselor's mind from the moment a client walks through the door ($r=-.43$, $p < .05$).

In contrast, offices with poor placement records tended to have counselors who focused on getting clients work ready instead of placing them, looked to other counselors for help with placement and blamed their woes on everyone but themselves. Specifically, offices with high percentages of Status 28 closures tended to have counselors who described themselves as being more knowledgeable than others on how to prepare clients for work ($r=.56$, $p < .01$) and as knowing the value of different training programs ($r=.53$, $p < .05$). Also, offices tended to have low numbers of Status 26 closures to the extent that counselors said they frequently shared job leads ($r=-.53$, $p < .01$) and frequently shared information about job requirements ($r=-.46$, $p < .05$). When counselors were asked about reasons for unsuccessful placement efforts, those in offices which had high percentages of Status 28 closures tended to say that when a client fails to get a job the client rather than the counselor should be held accountable ($r=.59$, $p < .01$). Moreover, low producing offices were more likely than high producing offices to have counselors who said that their ability to make placements was impaired by employer resistance to hiring disabled persons ($r=-.45$, $p < .05$). There was also a tendency, albeit a non-significant one, for low producing offices to have counselors who said that poor client motivation to seek work interfered significantly with their ability to make placements ($r=-.40$, $p < .10$).

DISCUSSION

The present findings demonstrate a number of associative relationships between placement policy and office production. Because they are based on correlations of retrospective reports, causality is uncertain; however, the

implication is that administrators or supervisors may exercise influence over office production through judicious control of policy-related factors.

One important factor is the establishment of performance goals. Emphasizing goals for large case loads and large numbers of rehabilitations appeared to be characteristic of productive field offices, while emphasizing referrals and writing plans appeared to be characteristic of nonproductive field offices. The former finding has also been reported in previous studies (Eber, 1955; Mueller and Atlas, 1969; Zadny and James, 1977a). Thus the weight of evidence warrants the development of policies which encourage relatively large case loads and high goals for rehabilitation. By the same token, the present findings suggest that setting goals for referrals and plans may be counterproductive.

In accord with recent legislation, agencies have increased their emphasis on serving severely disabled clients; however, reconciling this emphasis with high production goals continues to be a paradox. Offices which reported placing relatively strong emphasis on serving severely disabled clients tended to have lower productivity. This finding supports the common notion that the severity of a client's disability is a major impediment to successful placement. It suggests that if service to severely disabled clients is to keep pace with high expectations of office productivity, VR must develop better methods of placing such clients.

The use of certain resources was favorably linked with placement performance. Offices which offered job seeking skills classes and work adjustment training, had case service funds increased beyond adjustments for inflation, and utilized outside placement parties tended to have good placement

records. The implication is that administrators and supervisors may exert influence on office performance by encouraging the use of these resources.

Finally, the present findings, in linking management practices with placement performance, supported efforts on the part of agencies to improve the way their services are administered. Management practices which foster a participative style of administration, clear and consistent communication of policy, stability of staffing, standards for the amount of time counselors are to spend on placement, and evaluation based on placement performance were more likely to be found in offices with good placement records. The findings imply that these practices may be instrumental in attaining high productivity. By the same token, they suggest that since public relations efforts on the part of the supervisor were more likely to be found in offices with poor placement records, such efforts may not be the optimal use of time.

By and large, the findings of the present survey conform to the general theme which has been repeatedly emphasized in past placement research. That is simply: Attention to placement issues is related to better placement performance. Where policy emphasizes placement-related production goals, resources, evaluation criteria, or time allocation, office productivity tends to be high. Where policy emphasizes hard-to-place client populations or non-placement activities, productivity tends to be low. At the very least, these findings suggest that as long as counselors and supervisors continue to be evaluated on the basis of their placement performance, placement policies should be directed toward optimizing these efforts.

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